

SECOND STRING: THE GARMENT OF CHARITY

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

From the Gospel according to Matthew (25, 31-46)

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus talks about the Kingdom of heaven through a series of parables. All faithfuls are called to be part of it through the practice of faith, the path to conversion, and above all by living in their own existence the love that originates in the Trinity and that Jesus came to reveal. The first Christian communities reflect on this great love that finds its crucial source in the gift of himself that he gives in his passion. After this, they endeavour to keep living this love by opening their hearts to those who most resemble Christ on the Cross: the poor, the little ones, the hungry, the dispossessed and all outcast by society.

In our prayers, we often address the Lord with the specific request that we may meet Him. We ask ‘Come Lord Jesus’, ‘Come Holy Spirit’ and in fact it is in the needy that his reply becomes manifest: Jesus shows himself in them, He makes his face shine on them. We pray to him with the words of Psalm (27,8) "Your face Lord I seek, show me your face". We then realise that our encounter with him does occur indeed, and it is in the "little ones", as we come to realise that they are our "brothers" and icons of his crucified face.

Christian prayer does not exclude anyone. Our Groups are called to live the charity of prayer in welcoming, and looking for those who, for different situations, feel marginalized or find it difficult to open their hearts to the Lord and find a place in ecclesial groups or institutions. Padre Pio's Prayer Groups must be open to everyone, beginning from those who find it difficult to find a space in the community of faithfuls.

SPIRITUALITY

From a letter from Padre Pio to Raffaolina Cerase

What this great saint [Saint Paul] cherishes most, however, is love and he thus recommends we should practice love more than all other virtues. He encourages us to do everything out of love, for Christian perfection consists in this alone: "Above all - he writes – practise love, as it is the only way we can reach perfection".

As you may have noticed, he does not request that we should be patient or bear with one another, which are in themselves fine virtues. Rather, he wants us to love, and he does so with good reason, for it might well be that we bear patiently with the defects of those around us and even forgive them when they offend us, but all this may be of no value if it is done without love, which is the most refined and most precious of all virtues and includes all the others.

Therefore, my dear sister, we had better hold this virtue in high esteem if we want the heavenly Father to show us mercy. Let us be very fond of charity and let us practise it. This is the virtue that makes us all children of the one Father who is in heaven. Let us love and practise charity, as this is our divine Master's precept. By this we shall be distinguished from the unbelievers, by our loving and charitable behaviour. In our love for charity, we must strive to keep away from even the faintest thing that might dim its splendour. Yes, in our pursue of this virtue, let us always bear in mind the great teaching of the apostle: "We are all members of Jesus Christ who is the head of us all, the members of the body": We should show great love for one another, remembering that we have been called to form a single body and that if we keep our love for one another, the beautiful peace of Jesus will invariably triumph joyfully in our hearts.

Charity, the most virtuous of virtues

What most of us tend to consider pearls of wisdom in Padre Pio's letters, can be found in his headings. He would never indulge in banal words, on the contrary he would straightaway express some valuable teachings. To Father Benedict he wished: «May the risen Jesus fill your spirit with divine flames and increase in you more and more the most virtuous of all virtues, which is charity. Amen "(Letters I). In another letter, addressing Father Agostino, he wrote: "May it please God to keep you in his holy love, and make you advance continually in the most virtuous of virtues, which is a holy Christian and angelic charity and finally may he grant us the happiness of meeting again soon, for I look forward to this and long for it." (Letters I).

Padre Pio recommended all his spiritual children that they should root the virtue of charity in Christ's own choices, and this meant they should avoid any possibility of compromise. If we read some of his expressions in the letters he addressed to his spiritual daughters, when he speaks of that virtue, he becomes categorical. In a letter to Raffaolina Cerase he recalls the teaching of Saint Paul: "What this great saint cares most about is charity and therefore, more than any other virtue, he strongly recommends us to put it into practice and wants every action of ours to be dictated by this, being the one and only virtue that contains Christian perfection: "Above all - he writes – act out of love, as this is the only way to perfection" (Col 3:14).

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us, but all this may be of no value if it is done without love, which is the most refined and most precious of all virtues and includes all the others. (*Letters, II*)

Padre Pio is keen that we should not only give importance to our gestures, but also be moved by an inner attitude of our hearts. When we act out of charity, this leads us to grow spiritually.

This kind of Christian approach wants to leave its mark in our everyday spiritual life: it is necessary that we seek the face of Christ in all of our neighbours, but also that we remove from our hearts all those attitudes against charity that can distance us, even unconsciously, from Christ. The sin against charity is not only the most frequent in our confessions, but it is also the one that is confessed with less shame, as we tend to excuse it as part of our human nature.

Padre Pio borrowed a specific term from the classics of spirituality: he called them "the frequent recognitions" of one's own weaknesses. He was constantly aware of these, and often extremely demanding as he meant to lead all souls to being fully generous as with the Lord.

Beacons of light, beacons of charity

This is how Fr. Modestino described the meeting of the faithfuls with Padre Pio: "Padre Pio was a beacon of light, which emanated fiery rays. Those who approached him remained enlightened and warmed up by him. The light and warmth that emanated from him led to faith, to hope, to charity. There are countless testimonies about this: "Thanks to him I have returned to faith". "He made me know God". "He has heated me up with the fire of his love for Jesus." Padre Pio would not speak extensively, but the few words he said would hit his mark, they would centre the soul".

Let us now recall the two evangelical figures of Martha and Mary, one representing the charitable vocation of the Church and the other the contemplative one. We could say that Padre Pio lived them in an extraordinary symbiosis (*Lk 10: 38-42*).

Padre Pio himself prompts us to interpret his love for the needy in this way: «What about my brothers? Alas! How often, not to say always, I address God the Judge for them, just like Moses did: either forgive them their sin or else cancel me from the book of life. What a nasty thing it is to live by one's heart! It means at every moment one is living a death that never kills, or experiencing a living death and a dying life." (*Letters I*).

Father Modestino is among the many who recognize the stigmata of Padre Pio as the most evident sign of his love for his brothers and sisters. He endured such a suffering for them, the blood literally shed for their benefit. The spiritual children of Padre Pio and - above all - the Prayer Groups feel committed to living not only his spirituality as prayerful people, but also his commitment towards the suffering and the needy. We ought to be clear that we are not speaking here of a hypothetical poor man who is the image of the suffering Christ, but of that real poor man, the one who stands before us with his open wounds, as they are the same wounds of love and self-giving of our Lord. It can therefore be stated that the spirit of prayer and that of charity blend together in the same worship for the Lord Jesus.

Charity is the second string of our instrument — the one that urges us to love even when pride and self-importance push us to assert ourselves, our viewpoints, and our resentments.

HUMILITY AND FORGIVENESS

A spiritual daughter of Padre Pio, Nina Campanile, went to ask him for advice on the penance to be done on the eve of St. Francis' feast day. On her own she decided she would do a day of complete fasting. Her spiritual director was inflexible: she had to leave the fast aside and rather go to make peace with another tertiary with whom she had had a row. She should do so, not while hiding from others, but at her house, after lunch, when everyone else was there. This was a trial for her, it was very hard, above all because she believed she was right, but – as Nina Campanile let us know - the spiritual fruit of this act was immense.

CHARITY: OUR LIFESTYLE

The relief of suffering! This sweet expression summarizes one of the essential perspectives of Christian charity, of that fraternal charity which Christ taught us and which, upon his direct warning, is and must be the distinctive sign of his disciples. This kind of charity, directed especially towards the most needy, is a fundamental part of the message of truth, love and salvation that every Christian is requested to announce to the world. This work for which Padre Pio prayed and did so much is a wonderful testimony of Christian love (JOHN PAUL II, *To the doctors and the sick at the "Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza" hospital*, 23 May 1987).

Prayer to Saint Pio *by cardinal Angelo Comastri*

Padre Pio,
you have lived in the century of pride and you have been humble.

Padre Pio,
next to you no one heard the Voice: and you spoke with God;
next to you no one saw the Light: and you saw God.

Padre Pio,
while we were running in a hurry, you remained on your knees
and saw the Love of God nailed to a Wood,
wounded in His hands, feet and heart: forever!

Padre Pio,
help us to weep before the Cross,
help us to believe before Love,
help us to feel the Mass as God's weeping,
help us to seek forgiveness as an embrace of peace,
help us to be Christians with the wounds
that shed the blood of faithful and silent charity:
like God's wounds!

Amen

HYMN